

What light do the Welsh law codes shed on virginity, marriage,
and divorce in medieval Wales?

The Welsh medieval law texts are a compilation of law codes from the 12th to 13th centuries, although they are often attributed to the 10th-century king Hywel Dda. Among the various extant versions, Cyfnerth, Blegywryd, and Iorwerth are the most prominent. The texts negotiate the competing influences of secular and ecclesiastical laws, as observed in the wider European context. Further, the law codes reflect a juristic tone rather than a lived social reality. The following deeper analysis of these redactions will uncover a society in which virginity, marriage, and divorce are used by kin and lords alike to commodify the female body.

Although Hywel Dda is believed to have died in either 949 or 950,¹ the Laws of Hywel Dda were compiled between 1175 and 1300, though they may still reflect earlier 10th-century customs.² Hywel Dda's influence on the laws is confirmed in the prologues of most lawbooks, which reference the king as responsible for reforming and codifying Welsh laws in the 10th century.³ These laws consist of three main redactions that reflect the politics and needs of their localities: Cyfnerth, originating in Maelienydd, which later became part of Radnorshire; Blegywryd, linked to South Wales, particularly Deheubarth; and Iorwerth, associated with Gwynedd.⁴ However, medieval Welsh law was not insular and was certainly not isolated from neighbouring influences. Evidence suggests that Welsh laws operated within a broader European context. There are notable influences from the early 8th-century collection of Irish canon law, *The Collectio Canonum Hibernensis*.⁵

Furthermore, laws concerning homicide and injury from the *Excerpta de libris Francorum et Romanorum*, a compilation of secular law produced somewhere in Brittany, Maine or Anjou between the 5th and 8th centuries, are incorporated into Latin B,

¹ Huw Pryce, *Native Law and the Church in Medieval Wales* (Oxford University Press, 1993), p.1, doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198203629.003.0001.

² Lisa M. Bitel, Review of Huw Pryce, *Native Law & the Church in Medieval Wales* (1993), *The Historian*, 56.3 (1994), pp 606-607, <<https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/huw-pryce-native-law-church-medieval-wales-book/docview/1296502638/se-2?accountid=130472>> [accessed 18 March 2026].

³ Huw, *Native Law*, p.3.

⁴ Ibid. pp.21-30.

⁵ B. Jaski, 'Marriage Laws in Ireland and on the Continent in the Early Middle Ages', in *The Fragility of Her Sex?: Medieval Irishwomen in Their European Context*, ed. by Christine Meek and Katharine Simms (Four Courts Press Ltd, 1996), pp. 16-42 (p.19).

a North Welsh lawbook from the 13th century, “without substantial alteration.”⁶ It can be argued that the Celts, namely the Welsh and Irish, had been absorbing external influences for centuries, as early as the first millennium BC, through migration, subjugation, and subsequent intercultural marriages.⁷ Essentially, the perspectives that Welsh law offers on virginity, marriage, and divorce are shaped by European customs learned over several centuries.

Further to this argument, the Latin Church's institutional influence on the medieval Welsh lawbooks is undeniable. Most first-generation Welsh legal manuscripts from the 13th century are believed to have been produced in church or monastic scriptoria. This is particularly true for manuscripts of a high standard.⁸ The clergy responsible for the physical creation of the lawbooks also shaped their content and legal principles. Late 12th-century evidence indicates an increase in Welsh clerics receiving the title *magister*, suggesting that those educated in English and French schools and who returned to benefices in Wales ultimately propagated their knowledge of canon law. Some of these educated clerics may have influenced Welsh legal and administrative practices by serving the princes of Gwynedd, suggesting a minimal separation between ecclesiastical and secular judgment in Welsh law. Although the prologues of the lawbooks differ in some cases, most acknowledge ecclesiastical influence in Hywel Dda's 10th-century reform of Welsh law.⁹ Overall, it is essential to note that the medieval Welsh laws in question neither existed nor developed independently of Western Christendom and scripture.

It is crucial to consider the nature of the texts themselves when analysing the codes they present. The medieval Welsh lawbooks were often written “by law-men for law-men”¹⁰ and were designed to serve as rulebooks for medieval jurists rather than as a direct reflection of lived social reality. Another challenge in understanding medieval life is that Wales lacks the extensive ecclesiastical judicial records available in medieval England. As a result, we mainly depend on the records of secular lords, which may reflect personal biases or motives. Therefore, it remains difficult to ascertain whether specific punishments outlined in the codes were consistently enforced or mainly

⁶ Huw, *Native Law*, pp.24-25.

⁷ T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship* (Oxford University Press, 1993), p.1, doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198201038.001.0001.

⁸ Huw, *Native Law*, p.18.

⁹ Ibid. p.72-77.

¹⁰ R.R. Davies, ‘The Status of Women and the Practice of Marriage in late-medieval Wales’, in *The Welsh Law of Women*, ed. by Dafydd Jenkins and Morfydd E. Owen (University of Wales Press, 1980), pp.106-130 (p.107),

<<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/reader.action?docID=6028005&ppg=127&c=UERG>> [accessed 18 March 2026]

served as deterrents to instil fear in women and promote moral conformity.¹¹ The consistent rewriting and adapting of these laws reflect the living society that they governed.

The development of Welsh law was deeply responsive to its society's demands. The ecclesiastical reform was met with resistance from those who wanted to maintain traditional customs, particularly those involving inheritance. While the South was willing to embrace the reform, the North was not. The Iorwerth redaction is described as the "least ready to recognize ecclesiastical privileges",¹² instead prioritising royal rights. When the North did conform to the reform, it was driven by political gain. Although the Iorwerth redaction initially permitted illegitimate sons to inherit alongside legitimate heirs, Llywelyn ap Iorwerth's 1222 ordinance largely ignored traditional Welsh law in favour of an inheritance practice that was fundamentally English to disinherit his own illegitimate son.¹³ This strategic move by Llywelyn indicates that laws in medieval Wales often shifted to serve those in power. Consequently, medieval Welsh perspectives on virginity, marriage, and divorce might have been influenced by political motives or religious beliefs.

The overlap of political and religious interests is most clearly seen in debates about medieval Welsh views on a woman's virginity. Virginity was considered an important asset in marriage and for marriage prospects. For a woman, losing her virginity would be considered an "enormous impairment", potentially causing "irreversible damage."¹⁴ It would be the responsibility of the woman's family to ensure that she remains a virgin until she is considered marriageable, usually until she reaches puberty, between the ages of 12 and 14.¹⁵ The family would later be relied on to provide testimony in the case of the girl's virginity being doubted. It was considered essential that the family had observed the girl since at least age 12 and for a substantial period for their testimony to be deemed reliable.¹⁶ In this context, a woman's body and virginity are regarded as her family's property, and once married, as her husband's. The inheritance of a woman's future children depends solely on verifying the mother's virginity before her union with her husband, resulting in a system of surveillance which deprived women of their bodily

¹¹ Jane Cartwright, 'Virginity and Chastity Tests in Medieval Welsh Prose', in *Medieval Virginites*, ed. by Anne Bernau, Ruth Evans, and Sarah Salih (University of Wales Press, 2003), pp.56-79 (p.65).

¹² Huw, *Native Law*, p.33.

¹³ *Ibid.* p.79.

¹⁴ José Antonio, López Sabatel, 'Perception of Female Virginity in the Medieval West and its Conceptualisation in the Medieval Welsh Law Codes', *MUSAS Revista de Investigación en Mujer Salud y Sociedad*, 5, (2020), pp.93-109, (p.103), doi.org/10.1344/musas2020.vol5.num2.6.

¹⁵ López Sabatel, 'Perception of Female Virginity', p.103.

¹⁶ Cartwright, 'Virginity and Chastity', in *Medieval Virginites*, ed. by Bernau, Evans, and Salih, p.62.

autonomy. This is evident in Cyfnerth's redaction of the Welsh law, which describes a pregnant woman identifying the father of her child. She is instructed to swear an oath in front of a priest, vowing that she will bear a serpent if she lies about the paternity of the baby.¹⁷ This policing was further legitimised by a religious culture that venerated the Virgin Mary as the "symbol of virginity,"¹⁸ effectively aligning a woman's worth and status to her adherence to the virginal ideal. Therefore, the loss of a woman's virginity signified a moral failure.

Most notably, this concept of "perpetual purity"¹⁹ was unattainable for most medieval Welsh women. Although the Church promoted it, Welsh laws and society did not accommodate any form of virginity that was not temporary. Instead, virginity was actively commodified, which can be observed through the perversion of *amobr*. Initially, *amobr* was a mandatory fee paid to a woman's lord upon her first marriage, cohabitation, or pregnancy. The responsibility of this fee fell on either the woman, if she eloped or entrusted herself to a man, or on whoever presented her to a man. It was otherwise noted within medieval Welsh law as the price for previous protection provided by the lord against the rape of a woman, as it was considered his duty to protect the virgins in his territory.²⁰ However, by the 13th century, *amobr* had become a considerable source of revenue for territorial lords. Interestingly, this was most evident in the Welsh Marches, where fragmented Anglo-Norman authority persisted. Here, territorial lords merged Welsh and English customs. The influence of English rule established that it was the new relationship, rather than the initial loss of virginity, that qualified for the fee.²¹ This change in the laws made *amobr* a significant source of income for the lords, effectively discouraging them from constructing or supporting nunneries where women would stay virgins, and thus would not pay any *amobr*.²² The *amobr* negated female bodily autonomy by using financial penalties to discourage women from making their own sexual or marital choices. In this context, the Church and the virginal ideal were secondary to the fiscal needs of the lords, who manipulated laws to enforce a recurring tax on women's bodies.

¹⁷ Arthur Wade-Evans, *Welsh Medieval Law* (Clarendon Press, 1909), p.272,

<<https://archive.org/details/welshmedievallaw00howeuoft>> [accessed 18 March 2026]

¹⁸ Jane Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity and Spirituality in Medieval Wales*, (University of Wales, 2008), p.17, <<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=5mLSxIL6eIEC&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>> [accessed 22 March 2026]

¹⁹ Ibid. p.203.

²⁰ Dafydd Jenkins, 'Property Interests in the Classical Welsh Law of Women', in *The Welsh Law of Women*, ed. by Dafydd Jenkins and Morfydd E. Owen (University of Wales Press, 1980) pp.78-105 (pp.82-85), <<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/detail.action?docID=6028005>> [accessed 22 March 2026]

²¹ Jenkins, 'Property Interests' in *The Welsh Law*, ed. by Jenkins and Owen, p.73.

²² Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity*, p.203.

In the case of rape, the responsibility of paying *amobr* would fall on the rapist rather than his victim. If this were not possible, then the territorial lord would receive nothing, as he had failed his duty to protect the woman from rape.²³ Interestingly, in medieval Welsh law texts, rape is described more as a theft of virginity, which is evident in the *twelve-kine* fine. Such a fine is typically seen as a consequence of crimes such as “violence, fighting, and theft without possession.”²⁴ Linking rape with these crimes in particular implies that her virginity, which has essentially been taken from her, is an asset that cannot be recovered from her aggressor. Further, it arguably diminishes the reality of the crime. The focus shifts from the victim's violation to the financial restoration of the territorial lord's revenue.

The rapist would face an additional four fines due to the gravity of his crime. These included two further fines related to a bride's marriage alongside the *amobr*. He would pay *cowyll*, the gift a husband would give to his bride the morning after their marriage is consummated, and *agweddi*, the woman's share of marital property.²⁵ Studies suggest that this rape might have been regarded as a legal union, which is why the fees associated with marriage are required from a rapist, forcing him to take on the financial responsibility of a husband. The rapist is also expected to pay *sarhaed* to his victim as an acknowledgement of the dishonour and insult he has inflicted upon her by raping her. Finally, he must pay *diweirdeb* to the victim, a compensation fee that, although unable to restore her physical status as a virgin, does serve to restore her legal and social standing.²⁶ The social status of the woman was also significant in determining the amount of the fees expected to be paid by the rapist. For example, regarding *amobr*, if a woman were the daughter of an official, her lord would receive one pound. However, if she were the daughter of a slave, her lord would receive twelve pence.²⁷

Although the law primarily focuses on monetary penalties, it also addresses more traditional, archaic punishments, particularly in the Cyfnerth redaction. There are seven extant manuscripts that comprise Cyfnerth. Peniarth MS 259B, which scholars also refer to as Manuscript Z, is a copy from the late 16th century of an earlier manuscript. This text notes that castration was used as punishment for rape, though scholars

²³ Jenkins, ‘Property Interests’ in *The Welsh Law*, ed. by Jenkins and Owen, p.74-75.

²⁴ Thomas Jones Pierce, *Medieval Welsh Society: Selected Essays by T. Jones Pierce* (University of Wales Press, 1972), p.305, <<https://archive.org/details/medievalwelshsoc0000jone?q=%22iva+dauid%22>> [accessed 23 March 2026]

²⁵ López Sabatel, ‘Perception of Female Virginity’, p.104.

²⁶ Morfydd E. Owen, ‘Shame and Reparation: Woman's Place in the Kin’, in *The Welsh Law of Women*, ed. by Dafydd Jenkins and Morfydd E. Owen (University of Wales Press, 1980), pp.44-76 (p.55), <<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/reader.action?docID=6028005&ppg=65&c=UERG>> [accessed 23 March 2026]

²⁷ Cartwright, *Feminine Sanctity*, p.202.

believe this was influenced by English laws. This is highlighted by the shift from secular, native Welsh laws concerning women to ecclesiastical canon law, especially evident in the Marches.²⁸ This English influence shifted the focus from compensating the victim to punishing the offender. While this implies a harsher penalty for the rapist, whose physical crime is now met with physical punishment, removing financial compensation no longer guarantees that the woman will not fall into poverty after the crime. In this context, the woman's status as a virgin is no longer rehabilitated by fees such as *diweirdeb*, leaving her a victim of rape with significantly affected marriage prospects.

The Cyfnerth redaction provides further insight into how rape was addressed in medieval Wales. It states that Celtic kings received large gold plates and silver or gold rods as compensation for the rape of women under their authority. In the Mabinogi, the Irish king Matholwch receives both items of compensation from Efnisien for mutilating his horses. The gifting of these "symbols of sovereignty and rule"²⁹ suggests that, through raping the women of his territory, the lord's royal authority is challenged. Thus, the rape of a woman is transformed into a *sarhaed* against the king himself. In contrast, a white rod was given to women as a symbol of sexual transgression.³⁰ For the king, the rod is a symbol of his power and authority, while for a woman, the rod is used to mark and shame her. This reinforces the idea that women were either virgins to commodify for financial gain or sexual deviants to be shamed.

Unfortunately, married women who were raped did not receive the same compensation as virgins. The rape of a married woman did not warrant any attention from her territorial lord, as her husband was now responsible for her and her safety. In this context, her rape would not require any *amobr*, as the assault did not alter her marriage status. However, a married woman and her husband would be entitled to *sarhaed* as compensation for the insult caused by her rape. Nonetheless, due to the severity of the rape and the possibility that the husband and his kin might seek revenge on the woman's rapist, the offender was compelled to pay an increased *sarhaed* fee, with the hope that this would satisfy the husband.³¹ Essentially, medieval Welsh laws regarded women as property to be transferred between male authorities, rather than as belonging to the woman herself. When a woman, or rather her body, no longer benefits

²⁸ Frederick Suppe, Review of Sara Elin Roberts, *Llawysgrif Pomffred: An Edition and Study of Peniarth MS 259B*, (2011), *The Medieval Review*, 11.11.29, (2011),

<<https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/tmr/article/view/17420>> [accessed 13 March 2026]

²⁹ R.C. Stacey, 'King, Queen and Edling in the Laws of Court', in *The Welsh King and His Court*, ed. by T.M. Charles-Edwards, Morfydd E. Owen, and Paul Russell (University of Wales Press, 2000), pp.29-62 (pp.35-36).

³⁰ Cartwright, 'Virginity and Chastity', in *Medieval Virginites*, ed. by Bernau, Evans, and Salih, p.61.

³¹ Morfydd E. Owen, 'Shame and Reparation', in *The Welsh Law*, ed. by Jenkins and Owen, p.55.

her lord, it is passed on to her husband, who may gain financially from her, especially if she is a victim of rape. The minimal compensation a married woman receives in such cases mainly aims to satisfy her husband.

Medieval Welsh laws aimed to formalise the complexities of marriage within a growing landscape of competing secular and ecclesiastical influences. The laws established a legal hierarchy of marriages designed to cover every possible scenario of sexual union, including even the least ideal of unions. Unions in which the bride was given to the husband by her kin held the highest status, and of those, there were two. *Priodas* was the most esteemed form of union. Here, the value of a woman's *argyfrau*, meaning her personal moveable goods, were considered equal to at least half of the value of her husband's moveable goods. If her *argyfrau* were worth less than half the value of her husband's movable goods, then this was *agwedi*.³² Interestingly, the union known as *priodas* places women as close as possible to equal with their husbands, at least financially. However, this should not be mistaken for individual agency, as the value of a woman's *argyfrau* reflects her family's status. Therefore, entering into a union with a higher value of *argyfrau* protects the bride's family if the marriage dissolves. In the case of divorce within the first seven years of a marriage, the union is not regarded as permanent enough to warrant a full communal sharing of property. However, the exception here is if the husband has a higher status than his wife, in which case he would gain financially from their separation.³³ Therefore, the sense of equality afforded by a union of *priodas* was only allowed to those who had the means to enforce it.

The hierarchy of marriages establishes that unions in which the bride's kin consent but do not gift her to her husband follow the *priodas* and *agwedi* in status. There are three unions here: *caradas*, *deu lysuab*, and *llathlut goleu*. The *caradas* is a union in which the groom lives with the bride and her kin. This is considered inferior to marriages of higher status because there is no formal act of the bride being given to the groom, and therefore, she receives less financial security upon entering the union.³⁴ In fact, the Welsh law assumed that "any cohabitation of man and woman by mutual consent created a legal union wherein the woman had the de jure status of a wife."³⁵ If a union could be recognised through cohabitation and therefore required a payment of *amobr*

³² T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'Nau Kynywedi Teithiauc', in *The Welsh Law of Women*, ed. by Dafydd Jenkins and Morfydd E. Owen (University of Wales Press, 1980) pp.25-43 (p.39), <<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/reader.action?c=UERG&docID=6028005&ppg=46>> [accessed 18 March 2026]

³³ Wade-Evans, *Welsh Medieval Law*, p.236.

³⁴ Charles-Edwards, 'Nau Kynywedi Teithiauc', in *The Welsh Law*, ed. by Jenkins and Owen, p.39.

³⁵ Davies, 'The Status of Women', in *The Welsh Law*, ed. by Jenkins and Owen, p.119.

to the territorial lord, then medieval Welsh law implies that the lord's financial gain from the entering of unions is of greater importance than a formal church ceremony.

Further down the hierarchy of marriages are those unions in which the bride's kin do not consent, but the bride herself does. Of these unions, there are *llathlut twyll* and *beichogi twill gwreic lwyn a pherth*. *Llathlut twyll* is an elopement that is kept secret due to explicit or assumed opposition from the bride's family. Similarly, *beichogi twill gwreic lwyn a pherth* is a union that is kept secret due to opposition from the bride's kin. Here, however, the bride does not live with the groom but remains with her own kin.³⁶ Both unions show independence from the bride. However, she does this by sacrificing her rights to her *agweddi*, as her kin, who did not consent, are no longer obliged to give it. Therefore, it can be argued that the laws are designed to pressure women into obedience. If a woman is not obedient and marries of her own will, she loses the privileges, such as *agweddi*, that ensure her finances and social status if she were to divorce her husband. In this case, the woman is potentially isolated from her kin and left with no legal advocates to financially support her outside of her union with her husband.

The marriages of the lowest status are *kynnywedi ar liw ac ar oleu* and *twyll morwyn*. In these unions, neither the bride nor her kin gave their consent. Both types of unions have violent connotations. A union of *kynnywedi ar liw ac ar oleu* suggests that a woman is abducted by force, while a *twyll morwyn* indicates a union based on deception, such as getting a virgin drunk to a point where she "cannot resist intercourse."³⁷ As previously discussed, studies suggest that rape was technically a legal union. In the case of a *twyll morwyn*, a virgin who was deceived, this meant that the maiden became her rapist's wife. The rapist, through the theft of her virginity, essentially purchases his place as her husband through the fees that he must pay for raping the maiden.³⁸ This suggests that the maiden's consent is replaced by a financial transaction, which essentially forces her into a marriage with her rapist. Further, since the union was of a low status, it would consequently lower the bride's social status. While she would be provided for financially, it would be by her rapist. The law texts suggest that, in order to avoid public shame, the maiden, whose rape had now turned her into a wife, should accept her new husband. Shame is only removed from her kin upon the payment of *sarhaed*.³⁹ Ultimately, while the union of a raped virgin and her offender might appear unjust to modern sensibilities, medieval Welsh law was pragmatic and aimed to provide social

³⁶ Charles-Edwards, 'Nau Kynnywedi Teithiauc', in *The Welsh Law*, ed. by Jenkins and Owen, p.39.

³⁷ Ibid. p.40.

³⁸ Owen, 'Shame and Reparation', in *The Welsh Law*, ed. by Jenkins and Owen, p.55.

³⁹ Ibid. p.49.

protection for the woman, whose marriage prospects would otherwise be severely harmed.

The seven-year period was highly important in marriage under medieval Welsh law. Only after seven years was a marriage regarded as sufficiently permanent to justify full communal sharing of property, except where the husband held a higher status than his wife.⁴⁰ This exception suggests that, above all else, the law aimed to protect the assets of the Welsh elite. Men of high status could enter marriages without the immediate risk of financial loss, in the event that the marriage did not reach maturity. In a divorce prior to this milestone, the woman would lose her *agweddi* and her dowry, though if she was a virgin before their union, the husband must pay her *cowyll*.⁴¹ However, there are specific circumstances in which a woman might divorce her husband before seven years without losing these. Such circumstances include if her husband committed certain faults, such as “leprosy, bad breath, and a default of connexion.”⁴² In this case, a woman would keep her *agweddi*. Similarly, a woman would not lose her *cowyll*, *argyfrau*, or *wyneb-werth* if her husband was found to have been unfaithful to her. This was the case only if he had been unfaithful three times. This principle can be observed in reverse. If a husband suspected his wife of having had sexual intercourse before their union, he could accuse her three times. Here, the wife makes three separate oaths: for the first accusation, she swears the oath of seven women; for the second, the oaths of fourteen women; and for the third, the oaths of fifty women.⁴³ It can be argued that requiring a body of fifty compurgators indicated that the law expected a woman to rely on her wider community. In this context, a woman needed to be well-integrated and regarded favourably within her community. For a woman whose kin were socially or politically marginal, this would be extremely challenging. This could be considered an intentional decision by the law to ensure that only well-connected families won such disputes. Moreover, demanding such a large number of compurgators ensured that accusations of sexual transgression would spread throughout the broader community. Here, a woman would be judged by her peers before she could be cleared or convicted of her alleged misconduct. Consequently, the law prioritises the opinions of the community over the woman's own word.

A divorce after the seven-year period would mean that the couple would share all that they owned in “two halves.”⁴⁴ The sharing of movable goods, however, might serve as a

⁴⁰ Wade-Evans, *Welsh Medieval Law*, p.236.

⁴¹ Dafydd Jenkins, *The Law of Hywel Dda* (Gomer Press, 1986), p.46.

⁴² Wade-Evans, *Welsh Medieval Law*, p.238.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Jenkins, *The Law of Hywel Dda*, p.45.

tactic to make divorce seem undesirable. In a divorce, items that are only useful when kept together would be divided between the couple, such as the husband receiving the under bedding while the wife gets the over bedding.⁴⁵ If the couple had children, these would also be split between them. In the case of three children, the father would take the eldest and the youngest, leaving the middle child to the mother.⁴⁶ The eldest child is the main heir to the family, implying that remaining with the father ensures the continuation of the paternal lineage after the marriage ends. This method of determining custody reflects the division of physical possessions, suggesting that children were viewed as assets of a union. The law favours the male lineage here. If a man were to regret leaving his wife, the law permitted him to take her back, provided she was not in the process of figuratively entering a new bed with a new man. If she had begun a new relationship, the husband no longer had a claim on her.⁴⁷ This suggests that, until a woman was in an established relationship with another man, she effectively still belonged to her husband. For a woman, a divorce did not restore her autonomy. Instead, she is treated as an object, traded between male authorities, such as her father and her husband.

However, a divorce based on suspicions that the bride was not a virgin on her wedding day was far more demoralising. Here, she is a *twyllforwyn*. In contrast to a *twyll morwyn*, a virgin who is raped, a *twyllforwyn* is a false virgin. The groom, who suspects the woman of being a false virgin, must accuse her in front of the wedding guests. If he does this and still goes to bed with her that night, he can no longer revoke the bride's marriage rights.⁴⁸ This suggests that intercourse finalised the marriage contract. However, the law recognised that it was difficult to determine whether a woman was a virgin once she had reached physical puberty.⁴⁹ Therefore, the bride's kin would be asked to provide a testimony, pledging that she was, in fact, a virgin. If the kin were unwilling to do so, the bride's nightdress would be cut "as high as her pubes, and behind her as high as her buttocks."⁵⁰ She would then be expected to partake in the ritual of the greased tail, in which she is offered a young steer with a greased tail. If she could hold her grip of its tail, which was unlikely, she would get to keep the steer. Otherwise, she would get nothing.⁵¹ It can be argued that this is designed to humiliate the bride, making her a spectacle before her wedding guests. Further, the greased tail of the steer can be observed as a phallic substitute in a crude metaphor. This humiliation shifts the shame of the deception regarding her virginity from the husband

⁴⁵ Wade-Evans, *Welsh Medieval Law*, p.239.

⁴⁶ Jenkins, *The Law of Hywel Dda*, p.45.

⁴⁷ Ibid. p.50.

⁴⁸ Ibid. p.49.

⁴⁹ Cartwright, 'Virginity and Chastity', in *Medieval Virginites*, ed. by Bernau, Evans, and Salih, p.64.

⁵⁰ Wade-Evans, *Welsh Medieval Law*, p.276.

⁵¹ López Sabatel, 'Perception of Female Virginity', pp.103-106.

to the bride. While this restores the groom's social status, it is detrimental to the bride. Essentially, this ritual suggests that, in the eyes of Welsh medieval law, a woman's economic rights were tied to her perceived sexual purity.

Ultimately, knowledge and understanding of Welsh law, particularly concerning women, remains limited owing to insufficient research on women and gender in medieval Wales, especially when compared with studies of England or Europe. It is difficult to discern whether the punishments outlined in medieval Welsh law texts were ever actually enforced or if the texts served as rulebooks for jurists, not meant to be strictly followed. The available research suggests that some punishments and laws concerning virginity, marriage, and divorce appear to be rhetorical ideals, possibly intended to frighten women into submission and obedience to prevent bringing shame upon their kin. Medieval Welsh attitudes towards virginity reflect a tendency to commodify the female body, with a woman's value often based on her sexual status. This is particularly evident in how laws were manipulated by those in power seeking to exploit women's bodies for financial gain. It should be noted that a maiden's virginity was of paramount importance, and laws relating to marriage often focused on her status as a virgin. In marriage, a woman's value and legal standing diminished if she was not a virgin at the time of union. Further, the laws suggest that even after divorce, a woman still belonged to her husband. Within the Welsh medieval law, women are treated as objects of little or no agency or autonomy.

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